Like a Lover

STEALTHILY, on Summer nights, a young girl would creep out of the house (her mother asleep behind one door, her uncle behind another) sitting down on the carpetted stairs and sliding from step to step, remembering every loose board and graduating the pressure of her feet upon them, leaping from the threshold into the grass, shrinking behind a tree—her eyes fixed on the bedroom windows where a match might flare, on the doors where one of them might appear—then darting across the lawn and running, running until a man came out of the hazel bushes to take her in his arms.

On those hot nights the sleepers lay without covers, muttering and grinding their teeth. Mosquitoes pressed against the screens. The pans of milk had been placed where

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the draught between two windows would keep them from turning sour. The cattle grazed on the hills as if it were day. Moles and rabbits shrank against the sod, and owls hooted, rolling their yellow eyes and snapping their beaks which were like pairs of curved scissors.

In the lane between ripening orchards the lovers, a slim girl and a man of middle age, spoke little, and when they did, the broken phrases mingled in the shadows with the chirping of crickets; and as they embraced, the girl often shed tears.

Her mother had forbidden her to speak to this man. Alice Murray was too young to be thinking of men, and he was nineteen years older than she. Alice had admitted that she liked him, and her mother had said that she would die of shame if anyone found it out. Because, because—no one knew why.

He was a widower named Hurst who had come from Iowa and rented a farm near Hope's Corner, Wisconsin. He had not been

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trusted in five years. He worked hard, he was saving, he did not drink; his housekeepers were always old women to whom he paid no attention. But everyone wished that he would move to another part of the country: not because he never went to church (others were without faith) nor because he was not sociable (others were sullen). Someone said that he could not keep a dog; all his dogs ran away and took refuge in other people's barns.

Then Mrs. Murray had found out that Alice had been walking with him in the evening, and had told the girl that the next time she disobeyed she would be put out of the house to shift for herself. Alice had listened, sitting very still with her hands in her lap, and had seemed to be looking at something the mother could not see. Mrs. Murray had said that her soul was sick, and she would come to a bad end. Alice had listened as if to an announcement that someone was going to die—a pet, a friend, a relative, herself maybe—but of course everyone had to die,

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so what could one do? Finally her mother had wept. She was a hard woman; her husband had been dead a long time; the brother who worked her farm was a weak old bachelor whom she had to govern; she was like a man and wept like one, her head bent over between her knees. Alice had wondered how she could explain that she was helpless; but she could not explain, could not promise, and could not weep. She would have liked to. Paralyzed . . . How could she make her mother understand that? Her mother had said that if it ever happened again she would have to whip her terribly. The girl had hoped that her mother would not find out what she was certain to do; that had been all she could have said, and she had not dared say that.

The summer had come, and continued. Leaves swelled that would be wilted by the frost; corn ripened that would be ripped from the husk; the lambs and young cattle

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fattened that were to be butchered. These things happened inevitably.

And in the same way the flickering of a certain charm in his eyes was inevitable. They were round eyes with rays of clear yellow shooting out from the pupils and red veins radiating over the white eyeballs—she saw them when he struck a match for his pipe. If he kissed her cheeks, they held, as if in a little pointed scar, the memory of his mouth. If he stretched out his hand, she responded to the touch before it reached her. If he had told her to sing, there under the ragged elms, she would have straightened and sung, whoever heard, like a whip-poor-will. When that bird sang—each throb of sound seemingly the equivalent of a throb of pain—she imagined herself singing like it, making music as bold, as wounded, at his bidding. But he told her only to be still and not to think.

Then he came back with her to the garden gate where the elder blossoms hung like

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delicate handkerchiefs, and embraced her there; and she, who had crept out of the house with so many trembling precautions, returned as confidently as if she were walking in her sleep.

She had oiled the hinges of the door of her room, and not being latched it swung back noiselessly at the pressure of her fingers; and she tiptoed over the threshold, the pupils of her eyes dilated for the darkness. But there was no darkness: a lamp rolled low—her mother—her mother—getting up unsteadily —something in her hand. She remembered her mother's warning, and by the glow of the lamp (the flame on the wick making a little noise, *pruh*, *pruh*) she saw and in one second understood the face like a wooden mask, the unbalanced steps, the uplifted arm. . . She saw without seeing clearly, dazzled by the delicate light; and her mother had not yet crossed the room, but she was very near.

The girl gasped, fell on her knees, and threw her arms around the other's knees. Her

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mother whipped her with the strap. A voice in the girl's mind kept saying, It does not matter, it does not matter—but the strap cut through her thin shirt-waist. When the strokes of the arm over her head were regular, she could catch between her teeth the cries which rose; but when a stroke, disturbed by the mother's weeping and incoherent words, fell out of its turn, and when she remembered that only a minute had passed since she had left her lover (and she saw him standing between the garden gate and the clump of elderberry blossoms, like handkerchiefs) she began to scream.

Her uncle, unable to endure it, slammed his door and stumbled down the stairs and went out to the barn.

At last the mother also sank to her knees, and they embraced, sobbing, as two women after an accident (two women strangers to each other) weep, clinging together.

But all the next day the girl waited with perceptible impatience for the night; so that

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her mother was desperately aware of the minutes hurrying one after another, and whenever the clock struck, she shuddered. They were sitting in the grape arbor by the road when a man came down the hill on foot. Alice knew Hurst at once; her arms stiffened along the arms of the chair. Past the cherry orchard, past the stable, past the garden... Then her mother recognized him and stood up abruptly; the mending in her lap fell to the ground; and she bent over Alice as if to protect her or detain her, putting one hand on the girl's shoulder, and turning her face so that she could see the man if he approached them, but need not look if he were passing by.

Would he stop? Now Alice was sure that he had heard her cries the night before; and what had he come to say? Both women held their breath... He was passing by without looking at Alice, he was giving all his attention to her mother, he did not seem to see that she was there. The mother's eyes were like

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two bits of glass, the man stared at the mother, the girl at the man. And then Alice observed on his face a curious expression, whose meaning she could not begin to understand: an expression most like that of envy.

He was gone. Tears ran down Alice's cheeks. Her mother said firmly that the following day she would have to go away to visit an aunt who lived in Waukesha.

During the afternoon Alice took a screw-driver from the tool-box of a mower and put it under the mattress of her bed, and hid some matches and a candle-butt in a pitcher. After supper, as she had expected, her mother led her up to her room and locked the door. Alice waited until the house grew still, lit the candle, stuffed paper in the keyhole, laid a skirt along the crack under the door, and with the screw-driver unfastened the cheap lock. Then she blew out the candle, and crept down the stairs as she had done night after night, but trembling as never be-

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fore, trembling like a phantom whose hour has come and who is about to disappear.

By the time she found Hurst in the orchard lane she was weeping, shuddering, and stumbling; but gradually she grew quiet in his arms, because they held her like a great rope and there was no room for violent emotion. He kept repeating quietly that now she must stay with him and marry him and never go back to that house. Then he comforted her, calling her "poor baby," and she cried again, partly because of the pain and partly because the words reminded her of her childhood, now at an end; but nevertheless she could not think of returning to her mother after what had happened.

The next morning they took the train to Waukegan, Illinois, and were married. She was happy for five days. On the sixth she received this letter from her mother:

"Dear Allie: I don't think I can stand it to see you. My heart has been bad

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again. I guess you'll have a hard life.
If you need me I'm still your mother.
Your heartbroken Mother."

After that she was often afraid. She stayed at home always, for Hurst seemed to prefer it; furthermore, she did not want to meet her mother and uncle though she often cried with homesickness, and she never crossed the road to the barn without glancing up and down to be sure that no one was approaching. Their nearest neighbor, the only one who came to the house, was a school friend older than Alice who had married a farmer named Clifford. This woman stopped whenever she drove to the village, and asked enigmatic questions, staring into Alice's eyes with anxious avidity, as if afraid that something was being kept from her: something phenomenal, something dangerous, the commencement of something inevitable . . .

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Alice was often afraid, and she began to notice the whips and heavy clubs standing about in the corners of stalls and behind the cattle-stanchions and on the back porch. Her husband took pride in his tool-shop—the saws, adze, pliers, and chisels, polished and in faultless order—but she disliked going into it; if she needed kindling, she looked for sticks that she could break across her knee, and when she had to drive a nail, she did it with the heel of a boot or a stone. The house was comfortable, though obviously the only women who had lived in it had been hired help; but there were no flowers or pets, the cattle were not named, and her husband had no pictures of his relatives to show her. She never went into the barns without calling his name first, and tried not to wonder why. When night fell her vague terrors came to a climax; but she always went to sleep beside her husband, thinking that she had married too young, thinking that it was mature life

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which brought with it constant fear and a little pain—never blaming him.

The charm disappeared from his eyes as she went on living with him, and he seemed smaller and more like other men. No longer was she under a spell—they were man and wife, and he took her for granted; but since she had married him, the circumstance of marriage itself held her in a kind of paralysis.

But she lived with him only about five weeks. Though she did not expect to be happy in her marriage, she had not thought of going home—perhaps never would have thought of it—but for what took place on Sunday, the fifth of October, in the night. The next morning, after Hurst had gone to the fields, she wrote on a piece of paper which she left on the kitchen table:

"I cannot stay here any more. I have gone home. I believe you know why. If you don't know, you can come and see me. Your wife."

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She went on foot, trying not to arouse the curiosity of those she met, and running when the road was empty. Her strength lasted until she saw her mother standing on the porch at home, but she fell to the ground then, with her hands over her eyes.

One year passed. No one knew what had happened. No one talked of anything else. No one could decide whether or not Mrs. Murray knew. Hurst did not come to see her. Scarcely anyone spoke to him except on business; he became an outcast without leaving the country, and seemed not to care, though he never raised his eyes to look anyone in the face.

Another year passed. Once more Alice did not leave her home, and looked up and down before she crossed the road, avoiding her neighbors and dreading the sight of her husband. She began to be called Allie Murray again, instead of Mrs. Hurst.

Three years . . . From her porch she could see the road that came down from his farm

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and always recognized his horses. During that year she saw him within speaking distance upon four occasions; they did not even bow, but she was ill each time for several succeeding days.

Four years... Hurst divorced her. She never spoke of her marriage, and indeed spoke very little about anything. She took in sewing, but could never learn to do more than the simplest things, such as undergarments, gingham dresses, and children's clothes; and when she had nothing to do, she sat on the porch.

Five years... She looked like a woman who has never been married. New people sometimes did not hear of her marriage until they had been in the community two or three months. She was stronger than her mother now, but seemed as old. She looked like almost any woman and might have been of any age.

Six years... She lived like a woman who has never been married. She had a canary

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and two cats which gave her great pleasure. Mary Clifford came to visit her every week or two, but when she gave up trying to find out why Alice had left her husband, they had little to say to each other. Her uncle died, and they found a steady hired man after having tried two others. Her mother kept the entire responsibility of the housework, because Alice was absent-minded.

Seven years had passed. The evergreen, which before her marriage had been a small thing, like a feather set on end, was now a tree with tufts of needles moving and sighing on every bough. Seven years which had seemed very much alike, though some people said that the winters were milder now and the springs began earlier . . .

Then a young widow named Mrs. Clayburn came into the community as a seamstress. Alice heard of her first as a rival, for women who would not have thought of going to a new and more expensive seamstress for work that Alice could do, spoke with interest

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of the newcomer to annoy her; but she did not care. Mrs. Clayburn lived in Bellville, a town about six miles away; Alice lost no customers, and forgot her very existence until one day Mary Clifford said it was common knowledge that the widow was going to marry Hurst. As she said it, Mary Clifford seemed to grow very small, like a doll, a little thing which danced up and down; and a voice, Alice's own voice, cried out to her friend, so infinitely far away, "What does that mean to me?" and suddenly Mary Clifford was saying good-bye.

That night she lay awake, reviewing the events of those five weeks, seven years before, mechanically, as if it were a story she had memorized, and before the dawn lay in the east like a bouquet of flowers on a threshold, decided what she ought to do.

"I am going to town today," she told her mother. After the noonday meal, she put on her best dress of brown cashmere sprigged with violets, and brushed her long hair

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(strands of iron-gray, strands still bright, like rust on the iron) and pinned it up in a figure-eight, and stood for a long time before the mirror gazing at her face, twisted almost imperceptibly here and there by flaws in the glass. How different from the face of her girlhood—for she was thinking of the past: the pupils of her eyes very heavy on the lower lids, the mouth as firm, as much like a man's mouth as her mother's. Her mother had had such a hard life. Had she (Alice Murray, Alice Hurst) had a hard life? Almost no life at all—five weeks. Five weeks, and now... For her face was different also from that of the day before: a faint blush in the hollow of the cheeks, and in the eyes which had not sparkled for years, a motionless luster. She tried to part her lips in a smile, as if determined to begin to be once more what she had been so long ago; but she was too excited even to imitate a smile.

As she drove away from the house, the plumes on her hat, like the tails of two minia-

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ture squirrels, trembled more than the motion of the buggy alone would have made them tremble. She was resuming her life, and felt the pride of all women with a warning message. No longer was she merely a married woman who was like an old maid; no longer was she one of those neglected personages whose mystery has been forgotten as all insoluble mysteries are, one of those friendless creatures who have experienced but one thing —the thing of which they dare not speak.

Her face which had resembled the face of almost anyone, now wore a remarkable brightness—experience which was hers alone suddenly seeming to have been concentrated there, glowing on her strained lips and feverish cheeks, shining through the dullness of her eyes in which tears had been too often restrained, weeping freely at last. Now and then a man stooping over a bundle of grain in a field, paused, wondering "what Miss Allie was up to"; or a woman on a porch would call to another indoors; and for a moment,

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here and there along the road, her enigmatic life would be remembered—but not as she remembered it. Her memory, thus aroused by circumstances, was like a hallucination; it startled her again and again. She clutched her hat; her tears dried suddenly in her eyes; and she did not see the glittering straw in the harvest fields, or her neighbors who spoke to her, or the children of those who were so fortunate as to have children, playing by the road.

She drove into Bellville. This was the house; a family she had known in her girlhood had lived in it. The soft maples, the plants in the garden tied with strips of cloth, the stoop-shouldered porch—she saw them less clearly than she remembered them. But her friends, not friends any more, were not there; a stranger had taken their place, a stranger to whom she was bound by an intimacy more extreme than ever united friends. As she knotted the tie-rope about the horse's neck, her hands shook with the

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embarrassment of a recluse forced to become an intruder. But she crossed the lawn to the door with assurance, as if her errand had made her young, at least as young as she was.

She knocked. Just inside the door stood a little child—she had not known there was a child. Its hair was yellow like straw, and, stretching out its hands, it made the gesture of the Child on the Virgin's knees which Alice had seen in pictures in the parlors of German Catholic families. It kept repeating in a faint sweet voice syllables she could not understand. Her tears started again, and she pressed her fingers against her lower lip, thinking she would have to run away over the lawn, and down the road, and home.

But her knock had been heard. Mrs. Clayburn came into the hall and stood beside her child, which hid its face in the mother's dress. She was a pale, strong woman wearing a red dress; blond hair in numerous puffs encircled her stolid face; she gazed at Alice, mildly. "Please come in," she said.

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Remembering that she would be expected only to order a dress, Alice crossed the threshold. The young widow indicated a chair in the parlor, took the child in her arms, and carried it to another room where the sound of a sewing-machine ceased, and returned. "I am Mrs. Hurst," Alice said.

In less than an hour, seeming to brush away a veil before her face, she hurried out of that house. And she drove down the road, urging the lazy mare, "git-up, git-up," slapping the reins against the dashboard, shielding her eyes against the light and against the hard fence-posts passing in two processions. It was so hot, the summer would soon be over. She had been so defeated, she could not suffer indefinitely longer. She thought, It is autumn, the men are taking in the harvest; and thought, I know what the end will be, and it will not be long coming.

"I am Mrs. Hurst," she had said; and then, not knowing how to go on, she had asked, "What is your little girl's name?"

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"She is called Lily," the widow had answered. "Why have you come?"

There had been a clock ticking, and the strokes had seemed to be irregular. "Why have you come?"—once more.

Then Alice had asked if it were true that she meant to marry Hurst.

"What is that to you? You aren't his wife any more."

Alice had begged for an answer, her eyes resting on the hem of the other woman's skirt, for she had thought of throwing herself on her knees.

"You want to be his wife again. Jealous . . ."

Alice had protested, and had explained that it was she who had left him, that she had been divorced because she had left him, that she had never spoken to him since; and had insisted on telling the other what had happened.

Mrs. Clayburn had straightened in her

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chair. "You needn't. I'm going to marry him no matter what you say."

Alice shivering, protesting, threatening vaguely . . . The other woman standing up, standing in the center of the room, her face extremely white, wringing her hands. "Leave my house. Coming to spoil my life. I won't have it. This is my home. Go away!" She had stamped her feet. "Go!" She had pleaded: "Mrs.—Mrs.—Hurst, please go!"

Driving down the road, Alice remembered every word, her own words: "I won't. Not until you know."

The widow had sunk drearily in a chair, her mouth quivering, her dry, opaque eyes fixed on Alice; and she had breathed, "What happened then?"

"I was afraid. I loved him. Loved him as a child loves its father. I mean I was in his power. Helpless, very young. My mother whipped me when I ran away. I was

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only eighteen." Alice had whispered as if she had been ashamed.

Mrs. Clayburn had tossed her head impatiently so that one curl had shaken loose, and fallen open like an opening hand. "Quick. What happened. . ."

As Alice had continued, the other, the one whom she had been there to save, had crouched in the chair and had smiled. "Fool." she had murmured. "Fool. He wanted to scare you."

Alice had wept, and the sewing-machine in the other room had sounded again like an enormous bee. She remembered afterward how her own voice had sounded, the words almost inaudibly rattling one on the other, lifting, dropping, like hundreds of leaves broken off at the stem. Leaves blown over his feet as he had gone off to work seven years before. . .

"Go on," the other had whispered.

And at last the woman who had whispered had panted as if with the fatigue of an intol-

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erable confession, and Alice had wept quietly as if she had been the listener. The young widow's eyes, shining and liquid with fear now, had not left Alice's face for the fraction of a second. "But he did not know what he was doing," she had said. "Walking in his sleep . . ."

Alice had answered quietly, "He knew. Before I went home to my mother the next morning I wrote a letter, saying that I thought he knew why I couldn't stay with him, and if he didn't know he should come to see me. He knew. He never came."

Then, for the first and only time, the young widow had screamed—a brief sound muffled in the palm of her hand; and Alice had known that she knew, that she understood, and that she believed. Shaking her head mechanically, the widow had gone on murmuring, "But I've got to do as I must. But I've got to do . . ."

Alice had implored, threatened, and pleaded. Her loud words, certainly loud

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enough to have reached the next room where the sound of the sewing-machine had ceased, had been interrupted by a little whisper: "Can't help it. I can't help it. I wish I could."

Then Alice had leaped to her feet and had stood over the other woman. The other woman had cringed, pressing her cheek against one shoulder. Alice had lifted her hand to strike her.

And in that moment the other had said, "I am powerless. Paralyzed. . ."

Alice had stopped, her hand in the air. *Paralyzed*. . . A stupor like a cold veil had risen in front of her eyes. Then, in the heart of the heat of an afternoon she had seemed to be sitting, her fingers loose upon her knees, listening to her mother's threats. And how pitifully she had tried to yield on that occasion, as one who is dying tries to let another breath enter the scornful nostrils and rejecting lungs, but she had had no will-power; paralyzed. . . In her mother's parlor (in the

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young widow's parlor) there had surged over Alice Murray (Alice Hurst) a lethargy, a lassitude. Was it herself, the inert creature in a red dress on the cushions? Was the one who stood with her hand uplifted over the other's head her mother, or was it she? Who was it who was weeping with anger? Which was she?

She would never forget the body of the other woman outstretched in the great chair as if flung down by violent hands, with no expression in the face but a disdain for expression, and a disdain for movement, and a disdain for all that meant to disturb her where she lay, peaceful, stupefied by the peace of an invisible embrace.

Alice had stared at her own arm, raised to the level of her chin; it had fallen to her side; and she had hurried out of the house.

She thought, slowly and vaguely, as she drove home: One day, out of certain eyes (eyes with flecks of yellow radiating round the pupil) one day in the center of certain

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eyes there burned a will-o'-the-wisp, and there was extended a promise not of joy or peace or any allurement, but a promise of what was ordained, what had to be. And what could one do?

She heard, in the beat of horse-shoes and the rattle of wheels on the gravel, voices protesting—her own voice identified with her mother's, saying, "You must not, you dare not!" And as she listened, the uproar in her mind died down; there was a hush, an end of crying and protesting; she held her breath, waiting, and knew perfectly well: What has to happen will happen surely . . .

Then in the yellowness over the stubble a song-sparrow lifted its voice, invisibly and in vain.

She remembered a preacher, a little man with a child's smooth, ardent face, saying that one of the five points of faith is predestination: a decree from eternity respecting all events, God having ordained in his omnipotence the happiness or misery of every one

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(his face had grown pale as he spoke) the passion, the marriage and death, the agony of every one. God like a lover, waiting, stepping out of the hazel-bushes in the dark, opening his arms. . .

You did your best. You did what you could (mothers and widows and girls). And having failed, you drove down the road alone, slapping the reins on the hindquarters of an old horse in an agitation like that of a dream; and the harvest fields swam by, and the sparrows sang in chorus, and the heaviness of the sun, loose there among the majestic trees, was gradually brought to earth. . . She had done her best. Nevertheless, Mrs. Clayburn would marry Hurst, and she would be killed; it was sure to happen, it had already happened—in secret, in Alice's mind.

The road led down to the river, and on the bridge her hands tightened involuntarily on the reins, and the horse stopped. Down from the north between the ghostly willows the water came in a foul, sluggish flood, go-

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ing down to sunken places, each one lower than the one before, not to be withheld from annihilation in the last sunken place. As it went it rippled softly up and down its infinite length with a sigh of satisfaction. Alice watched a branch which came down, turning and staggering slightly on the surface, one branch marking the motion of the whole stream, large and full of débris. There on the bridge, her eyes bewildered by the palpitation and the weaving of the water, she wept—the last weeping there was to be.

As she drove into the yard, she wondered if she would have the strength to look into her mother's querulous face, to change her clothes, and sit down to supper, and clear the table, and dry the dishes. . . But all these duties were accomplished at a great distance from her mind, and suddenly she found herself sitting on the porch alone. The great, gilt sunset stood on the hills, reflecting nothing. Over its painted glitter many bats, like little black hands without wrists, fluttered;

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and among them a hoot-owl mourned, hunting above the meadows, around the barn, and down the lanes.

All over the darkness that night there were passive images: the most violent movements stopped in the moment of their climax; hands and incredulous faces, male and female; floating debris on the perpetual flood. Hallucination melted into nightmare. She seemed to fall asleep with her eyes wide open, and woke staring at the dawn which lay in a little, reddish heap on the horizon.

She waited on the porch. Sometimes Mary Clifford visited her, driving down the road which passed Hurst's house with a lame, white mare which nodded its head and tossed its gray forelock; and while she was there, Alice scarcely felt her fear in the effort she made to conceal it. At last the day came when Mary Clifford said that Hurst and Mrs. Clayburn had been married. Unable to be surprised, unable to feel sharply anything in which there was no surprise, Alice was

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content. It was as if she were listening to a long, too long story; she knew what the end was, but it went on and on; and there could be no peace until the last words were pronounced.

Two months passed, which seemed as long as the seven years. She stared up the road which led along the edge of the Hurst farm to Mary Clifford's house. The end would come from that direction, down that road; Mary Clifford would bring the news. And as she watched, dark spots would form in the empty light, and on the spots insignia would shine; a pair of scissors, a pitchfork, or an axe, most frequently a knife. She grew familiar with these things, and with all the ghosts which visited her: the motionless woman in the armchair, the eyes with flecks of yellow on the iris, the child which kept looking out of a door, making the gesture of the Christ-Child in a picture; and she grew tired of them, so tired at last that she longed for the day when, leaving her nothing to wait

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for but the end of her own life, they would come together and then vanish.

The last day... Alice looked up the road. Her sight was failing, but she saw a white horse coming down the hill. Over the hedges and through the trees she saw its shaken mane and forelock, as if someone were waving to her with a large gray handkerchief. It moved with unusual speed; and then she saw Mary Clifford almost standing in the buggy—leaning over the dashboard—whipping the lame, white mare. Alice, fainting away, fell backward on the porch.

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